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Covert CIA Action Not as Likely Under Gates

Probable Casey Successor May Want to Rein In Aid to Rebels in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan

By ROBERT C. TOTH, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—The Central Intelligence Agency is less likely to become involved in covert actions with the departure of William J. Casey as its chief, and his expected successor, Robert M. Gates, might want to rein in such existing clandestine operations as the CIA's major paramilitary supply operations to rebels in Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan.

This is the greatest single area of change forecast by U.S. officials and non-government experts Monday after the resignation of Casey, who has remained hospitalized since brain surgery several weeks ago, and the White House decision to nominate his deputy, Gates, to be the next director of central intelligence.

Gates, who has never served in secret operations, is known as a skeptic of such clandestine activity, these specialists said. CIA officers, one source said, believe that "Gates will be very hard on" the deputy director of operations, who runs covert actions. That would be distinctly unlike the approach of Casey, who "pushed covert actions aggressively," the source said.

Similar Views

Moreover, two U.S. officials said, Gate's skepticism is likely to be reinforced by similar views on the part of Frank C. Carlucci, President Reagan's new national security adviser. Carlucci was deputy chief of the CIA in the Jimmy Carter Administration when Gates worked on the White House National Security Council staff.

And Reagan himself, mired in the Iran-contras crisis, is likely to be unwilling to risk any new adventures, several officials said. But all the officials interviewed said they doubt that present activities will be significantly curtailed, because they are long-established policy.

During his six years at the CIA, Casey has been credited with increasing the role and influence of

the agency within the government, primarily because of his personal rapport with Reagan, whom he served as campaign manager in the 1980 elections.

Casey substantially reinvigorated the agency's covert action staff, which had been decimated and demoralized during the Carter Administration after disclosures of intelligence abuses in the mid-1970s. Thus, as Casey retires, it is ironic that this major effort is most under fire because of his and the CIA's own alleged involvement in the Iran arms-and-hostages operation and in the apparent diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan contras.

Mixed Legacy

It is not surprising, therefore, that Casey leaves behind a mixed legacy for Gates: a record that contains positive and negative features, as well as developments whose impact cannot yet be fully assessed.

On the positive side, Casey won major increases in funds and manpower for all of the agencies that compose the intelligence community, which the CIA chief oversees as director of central intelligence. Chief among the other groups in the community are the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency.

"It has been a major rebuilding across the board in which Casey was not turf-conscious by favoring the CIA," said his former deputy, Bobby Ray Inman, who also held high posts in the National Security Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency before retiring in 1982. He is now chairman of the high-technology Westmark Systems Inc.

"Casey also gets good marks for the intense interest he brought to analysis of intelligence and to the quality of the intelligence product," Inman said. "There's been some controversy here and there, but he succeeded in getting the community to address controversial topics in a serious way," such as its critical examination of the Reagan Administration's boycott of the Soviet oil pipeline shortly after it took office.

"On the covert actions, they were neither covert nor successful, in my view, and they detracted very significantly from his achievements," Inman said. "He took a great personal interest in covert operations, although they occupied only a small part of his time."

Casey had served during World War II in the Office of Strategic Services, predecessor of the CIA. To many observers and associates, he appeared to have retained a fascination for the secrecy and adventure of clandestine service and he always tried to follow its two main rules: "plausible deniability," in which the CIA's role in operations could be reasonably denied, and "put nothing on paper," in which little or nothing is committed to writing.

Re-Defection of KGB Man

On the negative side, Prof. Jeffrey Richelson of American University said, Casey bears the onus for the spate of "penetrations" of the CIA and other intelligence agencies that came to light during his term, even though some may have begun earlier, and for the sensational re-defection of a Soviet KGB operative, Vitaly S. Yurchenko, after he was in CIA hands.

In addition, Casey's relationship with Congress probably has been worse than that of any other CIA chief because of his freewheeling personal style—he is a self-made millionaire—and his lack of respect for politicians in general.

The result has been a mutual distrust. Many congressmen believe that Casey lied or at least dissembled during his mumbling testimony on the Iran-contras controversy, whereas Casey appeared to suspect that most legislators wanted only to learn secret information to leak it.

Gates enjoys better rapport with Capitol Hill and has come through the Iran-contras investigations with a relatively clean slate. Among other things, he apparently raised questions with Casey about suspicious events when they occurred, and "Casey declined to enlighten him," one source said. And, if Gates was under any cloud, the White House undoubtedly would not have hesitated in passing him over for the job.

For Casey, final judgment on his tenure must await the outcome of the Iran-contras affair. For example, Inman said, among the aspects of Casey's term that cannot yet be evaluated is "how much better the clandestine service is now at collecting intelligence. We on the outside just cannot know about such things."

Casey's work in intelligence operations began during World War II, when he served in the Office of Strategic Services, the pre-CIA intelligence unit. He was chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission under former President Richard M. Nixon and a member of former President Gerald R. Ford's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. He managed Reagan's successful presidential campaign in 1980.

In a two-sentence letter of resignation, he said to Reagan: "It has been a great honor serving you."

In a much lengthier message, Reagan wrote to Casey: "I have been fortunate to have you by my side. Your commitment and your achievements will continue in the institutions of government which you led so well and in the cause of liberty you so proudly served."

Gates joined the CIA in 1966, after receiving a masters degree in history from Indiana University. He received a doctorate in Russian and Soviet history from Georgetown University in 1974. From 1974 to 1979, he was assigned to the White House's National Security Council staff. He returned to the CIA in 1979, serving in a number of administrative posts and as national intelligence officer for the Soviet Union, before his appointment as deputy director for intelligence in January, 1982.

Staff writers Karen Tumulty and Sara Fritz contributed to this story.
